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ABSTRACT

Individuals vary in their need for excitement, involving a personality trait known as sensation seeking (SS). Previous research has found that a preference for rock music and participation in more self-disclosing behaviors are characteristic of high sensation seekers. This study examines if college student sensation seeking relates to the activities engaged in on the Internet and if SS continues to be associated with heavy metal and rock music. Also, high sensation seekers are expected to have a larger pool of casual and close friends in order to meet higher needs for arousal, stimulation, and diverse people providing novelty in the lives of sensation seekers. Results reveal that the intensity dimension of SS was related to getting sex oriented material from the Internet, downloading or playing music, playing games, and chatting/instant messaging with friends, demonstrating that the Internet can provide intense SS activities. Having punk music as a favorite emerged as the one genre most affiliated with high sensation seeking. The relationship between friends and SS yields a relationship that indicates how sensation seekers use friendships to reinforce needs for stimulation. (GCP)

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Sensation Seeking and Internet Activities, Music Preference, and Personal Relationships Among College Students

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Sensation Seeking and Internet Activities, Music Preference, and Personal Relationships Among College Students

Individuals vary in their need for excitement, involving a personality trait known as Sensation Seeking (SS). Zuckerman (1994) defines SS as "the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience" (p. 27).

The Internet provides access to arousing and stimulating activities, offering real-time chat rooms, realistic videogames, and streaming video. Goodson, McCormick, and Evans (2000) reported that college students indicated "having a general feeling of excitement and anticipation" and being aroused when accessing sexually explicit material over the Internet (p. 258).

Similarly, Litle and Zuckerman (1986) found that preference for rock music was positively related to SS, while preference for slower music was negatively related to SS. Because rock music contains sounds which are "dissonant with complex rhythms and harmony," it is attractive to the high sensation seeker (Litle & Zuckerman 1986, p. 576). High sensation seekers prefer rock and heavy metal because of the arousing quality of the music (Arnett 1991; Arnett 1996).

High sensation seekers participate in more self-disclosing behaviors in casual and close friendships than low sensation seekers (Zuckerman, 1994). Low sensation seekers might be expected to disclose to fewer people to fulfill needs for greater intimacy while high sensation seekers are expected to have more friends, especially casual friends (Franken, Gibson, & Mohan, 1990). So, SS affects the choice of friends and the level of intimacy within the friendship group.

In this study, we are examining if sensation seeking relates to the activities engaged in on the Internet, and if SS continues to be associated with heavy metal and rock music. Also, high

sensation seekers are expected have a larger pool of casual and close friends in order to meet higher needs for arousal, stimulation, and diverse people providing novelty in the lives of sensation seekers.

Method

Sample

138 students (75 women, 62 men, 1 did not state) from a California State University participated.

Procedure

The second author approached students, over a two-day period, who were eating in the campus dining facilities during lunchtime about participating in the study. The participants were given an oral and a written explanation about the research project and a questionnaire to complete. This study complied with human subjects protocols.

Measures

Demographics

SS Scale. We used Arnett's (1992) Inventory of Sensation Seeking (AISS) to measure Sensation Seeking.

Internet use. Participants self-reported their Internet use in the past 24 hours, in the past week, and in the past 30 days for common Internet tasks from sending email to more "arousing" activities such as getting sex-oriented material or gambling.

Musical preference items. We created a list of 15 musical genres that participants rated on a four point, Likert scale. Another item assessed which one musical style did they spend the most time listening to.

Close Relationship items. We created four items to assess close and casual relationships. Two items were five point, Likert scales asking "How many close friends do you have?" and "How many casual friends do you have?" The other two items were the respondents' estimation of how many close or casual friends with a blank space for the respondents to fill in a number.

Results

SS

On the AISS, the scores can range between 20 and 80. For this sample, the range was between 36 and 72 ($M = 55.31$, $SD = 6.47$).

SS and Internet-use

An independent-samples t test was significant for using the Internet to access sex-oriented material in the last 24 hours and total SS, $t\ (112) = 3.73$, $p < .001$. Participants who used the Internet to get sex-oriented material were higher on SS ($M = 61.33$, $SD = 7.41$) than those who had not used the Internet for that activity ($M = 54.44$, $SD = 5.89$). Using the Internet to download or play music and level of intensity on the SS scale were related, $M = 27.89$, $SD = 4.22$, $t\ (123) = 2.79$, $p = .006$. Accessing the Internet to play games and to chat/instant message with friends were associated with higher intensity scores as well.

SS and musical styles

There were positive relationships between liking heavy metal, punk, reggae, and ska and total SS. There were significant positive relationships between liking electronic/dance, heavy metal, latin, reggae, ska, and world music with the novelty subscale. Liking heavy metal and liking punk and intensity on AISS were positively correlated.

Individuals who listen to punk had significantly higher total SS scores, $M = 61.78$, $F\ (13, 104) = 2.74$, $p = .003$. Those individuals who spent more time listening to punk had significantly

higher intensity scores than those who listened to other musical styles, $M = 30.80$, $F(13, 114) = 3.16$, $p = .001$.

SS and friendships

High SS on the total sensation seeking scale was related to having more close friends, $r = -.22$, $p = .017$ (See Table 3). The number of close friends on the scaled item and the intensity subscale were also related, $r = -.17$, $p < .05$. There was a positive relationship between the number of friends and the novelty subscale, $r = .25$, $p < .01$. High sensation seekers also had more casual friends, $r = -22$, $p < .05$. In looking at the reported number of casual friends and sensation seeking, there was a positive relationship between the number of friends and the total sensation seeking score and the novelty subscale, $r = .27$, $p < .01$; $r = .25$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

In this study, higher sensation seeking was associated with getting sex oriented material from the Internet. More specifically, the intensity dimension of SS was related to getting sex oriented material, downloading or playing music, playing games, and chatting/instant messaging with friends, demonstrating that the Internet can provide intense SS activities. Lavin, Marvin, McLarney, Nola, & Scott (1999) assert that there might be a subset of sensation seekers who seek non-physical sensations as opposed to physical thrills which are typically assessed in sensation seeking measures. The results from this study indicate that there might be some sensation seekers who do, in fact, look for stimulation via non-physical means on the Internet.

In this study, having punk music as a favorite emerged as the one genre most affiliated with high sensation seeking. Like heavy metal and rock music, punk emotes the loud raucous sounds which continue to be appealing to high sensation seekers. Although not typically a style

considered discordant in rhythm and harmony, liking reggae was related to higher sensation seeking. Reggae music also may be seen as outside the norm of mainstream music.

The relationship between friends and SS yields a relationship that indicates how sensation seekers use friendships to reinforce needs for stimulation. These patterns indicate that sensation seeking may be related to the number of friends and the perception of number of friends. Because high sensation seekers have a strong need for optimal arousal and stimulation, they may seek out broad, varied friends and then perceive themselves as having many friends.

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Table 1

Means and standard deviations for sensation seeking and Internet activities

	Total Sensation seeking			Intensity subscale			Novelty subscale		
	Yes *M* (*SD*)	No *M* (*SD*)	*p*	Yes *M* (*SD*)	No *M* (*SD*)	*p*	Yes *M* (*SD*)	No *M* (*SD*)	*p*
Internet activity									
Last 24 hours									
to get sex oriented material	61.33 (7.41)	54.44 (5.89)	< .001	31.69 (4.57)	26.60 (3.94)	< .001	29.17 (4.97)	27.81 (3.78)	ns
to download or play music	55.95 (6.18)	53.54 (6.61)	ns	27.89 (4.21)	25.70 (4.07)	.006	27.88 (3.91)	28.10 (3.95)	ns
to play games	56.74 (6.30)	54.50 (6.36)	ns	28.37 (4.08)	26.60 (4.28)	.03	28.26 (4.15)	27.82 (3.82)	ns
to chat/instant message with friends	55.96 (5.86)	53.73 (7.14)	ns	27.84 (4.00)	25.93 (4.52)	.02	28.00 (3.72)	27.86 (4.27)	ns
In the past week									
to conduct research	56.97 (7.24)	54.40 (5.88)	.05	28.49 (4.27)	26.57 (4.18)	.02	28.58 (3.81)	27.68 (3.94)	ns
to chat/ instant message with friends	53.07 (7.04)	55.85 (6.06)	.05	26.03 (4.20)	27.47 (4.27)	ns	27.07 (4.14)	28.23 (3.81)	ns
to chat/ instant message with virtual friends	51.15 (7.71)	55.68 (6.06)	.02	25.29 (4.34)	27.37 (4.27)	ns	26.07 (4.43)	28.20 (3.79)	ns
In the past 30 days									
to read the news	53.00 (7.16)	56.01 (5.90)	.02	26.11 (3.78)	27.53 (4.42)	ns	26.84 (4.29)	28.37 (3.70)	ns
to surf the Internet	60.00 (6.94)	54.70 (6.17)	.01	29.80 (4.98)	26.90 (4.16)	.04	30.09 (3.15)	27.73 (3.92)	ns

ns = not significant

Table 2

Means and correlations between sensation seeking total, the novelty subscale, the intensity subscale and liking musical styles

Musical style	Liking scale† mean	Sensation Seeking Total	Sensation Seeking Intensity	Sensation Seeking Novelty
Alternative	2.94	ns	ns	ns
Country	2.17	ns	ns	ns
Electronic/dance	2.28	ns	ns	.22*
Heavy Metal	2.44	.34**	.28**	.22*
Hip hop	2.81	ns	ns	ns
Jazz	2.44	ns	ns	ns
Latin	2.40	ns	-.23*	.19*
Oldies	3.00	ns	-.18*	ns
Pop/rock	2.36	ns	-.23*	ns
Punk	2.51	.33**	.29**	ns
R & B	2.74	ns	-.21*	ns
Reggae	3.04	.22*	ns	.28**
Ska	2.26	.23*	ns	.20*
World	2.47	ns	ns	.36**

† 1 = don't like, 2 = somewhat dislike, 3 = like, 4 = like a lot

Note: ns= not significant, *p < .05, **p < .01.

Table 3

Correlations between sensation seeking and personal relationships.

Variable	Sensation Seeking Total	Sensation Seeking Novelty	Sensation Seeking Intensity
Close friendship scale[†]	-.22*	ns	-.17*
Number of Close friends	ns	.25**	ns
Casual friendship scale[†]	-.22*	ns	ns
Number of Causal friends	.27**	.25*	ns

Note: [†] 1 = many, 2 = a fair amount, 3 = a few, 4 = a little, 5 = none

ns= not significant, *p<.05 **p< .01,

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